

TRANSCRIPT

CITY MANAGER MICHAEL CLEGHORN, CITY OF LAWTON

PRESS CONFERENCE, 16 AUGUST 2021

Good afternoon and thank you for attending today's Press conference.

In an effort to remain as transparent as possible with the media and community, we have scheduled this Press Conference in order to dispel rumors, be forthright in staffing numbers and underline the importance of increasing vaccination numbers in our city and state.

Approximately 94 percent of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths are among unvaccinated persons. We understand, per our healthcare officials, that only 41 percent of eligible Oklahomans have been fully vaccinated at this time. As of Friday, an average of 68 cases per day were reported in Comanche County, a 61 percent increase from the average two weeks ago. Here at the City of Lawton, just under 45 percent of our 750-plus employee base are fully vaccinated. Area hospitals remain at or over capacity due to this surge, compromising the ability to potentially receive care or transport for minor medical issues. As such, taking measures to safeguard citizens and protect our workforce -- in order to continue providing essential services -- remains a topmost priority for Lawton City Management.

Essential services may include: Responding to and answering your calls for emergencies, repairing water lines, treating your water, or tending to road hazards. But, please make no mistake, it takes all hands on deck in 14 major departments to run this city efficiently and effectively.

On Friday, August 13, we shared with the community and the Press that the City of Lawton is approaching critical staffing levels. At one time, we had 22 police officers out due to COVID, 4 firefighters, and several general employees. This all occurred within a matter of three weeks.

Today, our numbers are better, but still require a careful eye on the number of positive COVID cases among staff.

If the trend of positive COVID cases continue in our organization -- it is a possibility that essential services provided by City of Lawton staff members could be impaired by longer wait or response times. We want the community aware of this and we want to, again, stress the importance of becoming vaccinated, washing hands, wearing masks and practicing social distancing when necessary.

The situation we find ourselves in is not unique to the City of Lawton. This is an issue that municipalities have suffered with since the onset of the pandemic. Taking this into account, City leadership has been proactive in implementing safety measures and encouraging staff members to take steps to protect themselves, their families and the community members we serve. An incentive by way of \$100 dollars and a day off was

implemented for City staff in March. Mask wearing and social distancing in City facilities was relaxed earlier this year, but have since been reimposed as we have tracked an increase in cases within our state and region. We have remained in close contact with the Comanche County Health Department and worked with them to host vaccination clinics twice a month at City Hall since May, encouraging everyone eligible to receive a shot. Communitywide notifications systems with COVID updates and news have also been in place since last Spring, funded through the City of Lawton. We are in trying times and must band together as a city and as an organization to make sure the Lawton community is taken care of.

A main driver in arranging this conference had to do with questions coming in about how our Emergency Communications Center is currently being staffed. We have set into place a loaned employee program as a contingency plan. It is true that Lawton firefighters and former dispatchers (that have since transitioned to work in other areas of the City) have been called into the Center to assist in answering calls for citizens. Approximately 15 staff members have been loaned to be on dispatch consoles since Aug. 2. They have dedicated 1-3 shifts each. It is untrue that any fire trucks have had to stand down to make this possible. It is true that we have received notice of a pending grievance from the Firefighters Association about this matter. We believe it is duty of first responders to protect and serve our citizens in all ways they may be needed, especially during challenging times so we will work through this

with the association and department leadership. This is not the first time that Fire Department personnel have worked telecommunicator consoles, as this had traditionally been part of training for that department. The emergency response to COVID-19 never let up for the City of Lawton as the pandemic has not ended; our public safety departments have remained diligent in implementing response plans as needed and making sure that services are still provided to citizens.

Our dispatch center is truly the heartbeat of our City. This center fields calls that are both emergencies and non-emergencies. The structure of our City is such that various calls are routed through the Center, especially after traditional business hours. It is vital to keep this Center staffed. Since 2020, we suffered with properly staffing the emergency communications center and various departments within our organization.

There are five critical service areas that a City must provide: E911, Police, Fire, Water & Sewer, and Solid Waste Collection. Today, we have more than 120 vacancies citywide. We are aware this is an issue that is not unique to the City of Lawton. We are also aware that many organizations within both the public and private sectors are struggling to fill positions right now. In tackling this issue, City Management has raised starting pay in positions of telecommunicators at Emergency Communications and Solid Waste Collection operators; we have also struck historic deals with our bargaining units for both Fire

and Police. Today, the starting pay of a Lawton Police officer is higher than that of an Oklahoma Highway Patrol Officer. Other recent benefits and incentives, (outside of vaccination benefits or incentives), include paid birthday leave and vacation buyback. We continue to make major strides in improving working conditions, environments and culture. We are well aware that public service is a calling more so than a career, and can often times be as demanding and complicated as it is rewarding. Recommendations from the performance management audit received in November 2020 from the NOVAK Consulting Group -- a report that was presented at an open City Council meeting and has since been made available for all to view at lawtonok.gov -- continue to be implemented across the board to increase efficiencies and effectiveness of services.

Today, we have invited you here so that we may provide a situational update to you in terms of where we are and where we may be. While we are well aware we are not the only organization grappling with such matters, we also cannot understate the importance of keeping our citizens apprised of ongoing matters as all operations within the City of Lawton eventually affect the day-to-day lives of citizens.